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A NEW DRIVE FOR GREEK

I

As we examine the course of events leading up to the war one conclusion must clearly be drawn: that it was directed with frightful stupidity. We had invented and put to use great scientific mechanisms, but they had hammered our minds into cruel rhythm with their own automatic and restricted processes. We had developed great political and economic forces, but they had grown misshapen and distorted beyond the power rightly to adjust. The material of life in our hands was massive, full of vitality and potential power, but our sense of form was uneducated and incapable of shaping it to poise and beauty.

One reason why our minds have not been able to grasp this "sorry scheme of things entire" is that we have never demanded that mind keep pace with matter. We have been afraid to test this surging civilization in terms of reason. We have refused to listen to those who would reform the structure. We have distrusted the philosophic mind. We have hoped that sincere and hearty emotion, intuition, religion would somehow manage the situation. It was indeed a forlorn hope.

Our peculiar Anglo-Saxon distrust of the mind has been apparent in two of our institutions: education and government. In education we have on the whole given confidence only to technical schools, where one small body of detail is mastered, to be sure, but at the cost of disregarding other fields of experience. This is exploitation of the thinking powers, and has resulted in a loss of mental balance and appreciation of moral values now lamentably obvious. And in government we have largely lost interest in discussion and argument as a method of arriving at sound policy. Congress has been more willing to resort to lobbying and submit to dictation than to attempt the lost art of dialectic. We stand in need of a new liberalism of thought, a new love of learning.

To bring this about, our liberal colleges must first of all become centres of the free intellectual life themselves. They must never again be regarded as social centres, business investments'

athletic clubs. They must not be controlled in the formulation of ideas by any outsiders, whether captains of industry or priests of religion. They must not allow their students to become mentally stunted by narrow specialization. They must become for this nation what it is their especial function to be: dynamic centres of broad and vivid thought. They must resemble Savonarola (according to Mr. Chesterton) in saving men from satisfaction. They must make us a people capable of viewing life in terms of understanding.

I know no means better adapted to stimulate this attitude in students than by getting them in sympathy with a culture more keenly inquisitive and intellectually alive than any other in human history—the Greek. No personality can challenge men's eager imitation more earnestly than Socrates, with his spirit of inquiry and his good-humored revealing of sham and vacuous self-complacency among the pillars of the older generation. I can imagine no more invigorating exercise in freedom of thought and breadth of background than an investigation into the rise of Greek political and social institutions, from the heroic communism of Homeric society through the days of Athenian democracy and empire; or in religion, tracing the roots of Christian ritual and belief back to some of their origins in Dionysiac rite, Platonic concept, popular and philosophic pagan dogma.

It is merely a suggestion that I offer; but I hope it will indicate the conclusion that such study will induce a liberalism of thought capable of sweeping away the cobwebs of inherited dogma and naïve intolerance which cling tenaciously in youthful minds. Small fear that it will bind them to the mast! It will rather give them the perspective necessary for the making of a future freed from vassalage to the present, based upon a broader and finer understanding of human experience. It will make spiritual internationalists, liberated from the prejudice of the clock and century, holding a concept of the present viewed in the light of some of "the best that has been seen and done in the world."

II

But most of our living is unrational, motivated by our instinctive likes and dislikes. We shall therefore need development in quality of feeling.

The economists tell us that "the substitution of the machine for the tool is the significant fact in terms of which all modern culture may be explained." One might ironically correct the statement to read "the lack of modern culture." For if any result is evident in the confusion of social programmes since the industrial revolution, it is that we have been too busy trying to secure economic adjustment to devote ourselves to beauty. We have spent our days on our "business in life," and have used up on sheer routine the precious vitality and nervous energy that might have been creating a new world. Unlike Stevenson's Young Belgian Royal Nautical Sportsmen, we can hardly say, "We are all employed in commerce during the day, but in the evening, *voyez-vous, nous sommes sérieux*." No, this high seriousness we have lost, and the loss of it is tragically shown in the sort of environment we select and tolerate. At best we have thought of art as a relief, a refuge, rather than as an inseparable part of actual, practical living. But there is no such thing as art apart from life; we are all artists, only most of us are fashioning our living in sad unawareness of the beautiful ways to do it.

In a society which has drugged itself with monstrosities of sound and color, which has sharpened no edge for sensitive and subtle sensation, which has lost the heart to care for beauty, in which the artist is regarded, not as a natural member, a sensibly revered teacher, but as an abnormality, how shall we correct our distorted vision, how shall we become converted? Rightly regarding ourselves as a people of action, shall we not come to understand that actions are determined by the judgment of likes and dislikes that we have constantly cultivated?

Two voices come ringing in my ears. One is that of Socrates, who, standing in fifth-century Athens, might well address to us his winged words: "Are you not ashamed to set your heart on wealth and honors while you have no care for wisdom and truth and for making your soul better?" And with this question comes the equally modern one which Vachel Lindsay asks for our poets' sake,—

When will they start our vulgar blood athrill
With living language—words that set us free?
When will they make a path of beauty clear
Between our riches and our liberty?

Surely the answer is obvious. We may take it for granted that never until we as a people become aware of the need of cultivating a sense for beauty and encouraging those who devote their lives to specific types of it shall the things of the spirit come to their own among us.

I cannot see a better way to enlist men in the love of beauty than by calling their attention long and often to a society frankly eager for beauty, seeing art as life, "with senses all alert." I have yet to find greater inspiration than in the clean and oceanic rhythm of Homer's ideas and verse, the precious expressions of perfect line and balance in vases and temples of fifth-century Athens, the restraint, the energy in repose of the Hermes or the Aphrodite of Melos, the subtleties of the Anthology's intuitive comments on life, the gracious vitality of Plato's idealism.

III

One of my friends wrote me from the front in France the other day of his impressions. "How I love this country and people," he said. "There is such quiet certainty, such vigorous serenity. We are so half-baked by comparison."

He found frank expression of what is, I believe, the chief failure of our social will: the lack of a quality of moderation, the golden mean. It is the attitude that Graham Wallas in his careful analysis of the "Great Society" declares is our urgent need, for "division of labor has been carried to the point where the mass of mankind have too much, some too little to do, for Happiness." Mr. Wallas pictures in the well-organized society some such situation as he found in Norway, where the workers "seemed to respect themselves, to be capable of Happiness as well as of pleasure and excitement, because they were near the mean in the employment of their faculties."

Moderation was an instinct with the Greek, though a rigorously cultivated one. It was built up wisely because of a national need. Greece schooled herself in restraint because of her danger from an excess of vitality that missed its mark. We suffer from a similar danger, due to an undeveloped and confused environment. We must learn to achieve simplicity. Homer can be our teacher, his heroism shot through with wholesome

sanity; Æschylus with his moral earnestness; Sophocles, seeing life serenely and whole; Socrates, ethical idealist, but a humorist as well, balanced and self-contained; Aristotle, clearest formulator of the principle.

IV

I approach the delicate matter of method. Granted that we need to cultivate these three attitudes, and that Greek civilization had them in significant measure, what shall we therefore decide to do? Must we all learn the Greek language in order to become "lovers of beauty without extravagance and of wisdom without unmanliness?" Why force new wine into old bottles? Cannot our students get the same stimulation in a more direct and modern way?

If Greece possessed and expressed these attitudes in supremely compelling fashion, as I believe she did, it would naturally seem that our boys should take unto themselves this environment of objects, ideas, and persons. This would be true enough, say critics of the proposal, provided the environment were a natural one and easily assumed. But in the case of Greek we find the way so beset with difficulty that the effort is decidedly not worth the while. Practically the same results can be more effectively and promptly gained by using modern material. I do not believe this is a valid objection, and present the following plan as a simple and natural method of exposing college students to Greek influence.

A course in Greek, knowledge of the language not essential, can and should be a one-year required subject for freshmen in liberal colleges. Boys need not know the language in order to realize the chief benefits that Greek can give. A year's course in the development of Greek thought and culture, using source books, literary masterpieces in translation, the stereopticon, will induce an attitude and outlook, the things we most desire. A rapid and discriminating study of the customs, art, ideals, institutions of the Ægean culture, Homeric period, Ionian cosmopolitanism, can be made without a knowledge of the Greek language; the Spartan military idea can be compared with Athenian democracy; the literature of Athens's fifth-century per-

fection and fourth-century critical alertness, even in translation, can engage a man's soul; any college boy can drink deep of the inspiration of Greek art, seen only in pictures; and a study of Socrates, his philosophic background, dialectical method, ideas of goodness, religious faith, and influence, can make a freshman conclude that "the unexamined life is not worth living" and venture forth on that very dangerous and rewarding quest: the discovery of his own soul. I believe in such a course, making use of all the Greek material available to appeal in sensory and intellectual ways, because I have seen it work. My keenest delight last year was to watch freshmen awaken under its stimulating vitality.

I would not say that there is small place for a study of the Greek literature in the original. Those students who by aptitude are fitted for it, I have no hesitation in saying, should be given the more thorough understanding of Greek which a mastery of the language alone can afford. And this is not a lost cause. Even the study of the language is on the increase, in the colleges. Last year in one college of 500 more than fifty students started the study. Similar tendencies have been recorded fairly generally of late years as preparatory schools have discontinued the instruction. Books have been recently published to suit the requirements of college beginners, giving the grammar very succinctly and basing the exercises and translation from the start on Plato, the Anthology, popular epigrams, Herodotus; material of great intrinsic value apart from the language study, in that it offers direct access to the finest thought and expression in all Greek literature. Much is still to be said for the study of Greek in the original if one is to be deeply imbued with the Greek spirit. For spirit does reside in the idiom and "feel" of a language. No German translation of *Cyrano* can succeed in giving me the indomitable and gay and subtle spirit of France; no more can English, with all its characteristic excellences, reproduce the *nuances* of the more flexible and picturesque Greek idiom. Someone may be content to call Plymouth Rocks and White Leghorns both hens; but there is a difference! The man who can read in the original Socrates's defence has a decided advantage over one who catches the spirit only through other forms of its expression.

The most unfortunate limitation at present, it must be frankly said, is the absence of teachers. It may with some justice be asked why the teachers of Greek at present have not made their profession more attractive, seeing that they have had an environment so spiritually stimulating. But it must be understood that these teachers have been trained generally to regard Greek material with a narrowly scientific bias. German higher criticism has done its best to bleed them white. Similarly, we may remember, people have read the words of Jesus and have developed from them a cult of monasticism which has regulated the religious emphasis of centuries with its dogma. In both cases we have a right to insist upon a revival of the original.

We need to-day, for this new presentation of Greek, men trained not so much in the niceties of grammar and scientific description of artistic data as in a humanistic and liberal approach to Greek material. And I venture to say it is not professional teachers we chiefly need. Men radiantly in love with the spirit of Greece, themselves intellectually alive, æsthetically eager, practically vigorous and balanced, will be needed to build that new society educated to completeness of life, to which we shall love to pay allegiance in more intelligent patriotism than we have yet known. No, we shall not fear for professional teachers, provided we have plenty of amateurs. As such we may well enlist ourselves together as a united army to wage this bright and valiant battle for the cause of Hellenism.

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